

Observations on British Butterflies in 1976, Part 2

By Dr. C. J. LUCKENS*

By the beginning of July the drought had become evident. On our return to the Wiltshire woods on July 1st we had to be careful not to tread on male *A. iris* as they crawled around on the track in search of moisture. We met two forestry workers in the centre of the wood who seemed interested in the butterflies and asked about "the special one that everyone comes to see". Just then, as if on cue, a superb male *iris* swept out of the oaks and settled on the track within two yards displaying its brilliant wings.

Along with good numbers of typical *A. paphia*, there was a sprinkling of *valesina*. To stand in the centre of the track and see approaching a dancing flame-coloured male paying court to a dark female flitting like a shadow down the forest corridor was a delight. In a more open part of the wood *Melanargia galathea* L. was common and a few dashing *Argynnis aglaia* L. jostled them and other satyrids for position on the tall thistles.

The heat was really intense on July 3rd when I undertook my yearly pilgrimage to Kent in search of *Plebejus argus* f. *cretaceus* Tutt. I personally do not know of any records for this butterfly of the Kent chalk since the late 60's and if it has really disappeared it is a tragedy. The genuine f. *cretaceus* is a superb form of the Silver-studded Blue and appears to be, or have been, confined to Kent, East Surrey and South Essex. I explored a former locality a few miles north of Sevenoaks but after a few hours climbing up and around the comparatively gentle slopes in the blistering sun even the prospect of finding the chalk-form *argus* paled beside the vision of cooling drinks in the shade. Even the numerous *aglaia* looked a little less vigorous than usual!

Before calling on my parents near Haywards Heath, I dropped into a wood near Lewes. There were good numbers of *paphia* and *aglaia* flying and several *camilla*. The male *paphia* for some reason were strongly attracted to lime patches beside a stream. In the centre of the wood a fritillary careering up and down a narrow ride looked and behaved like *Argynnis adippe* D. & S., but after I waited almost an hour for it to come within range it turned into *aglaia* in the net. It was definitely time to go home.

The following Friday, July 9th, I started at the Wilts. woods where I saw an excellent variety of species including *Eumenis semele* L. and several *valesina*, but not even a glimpse of *iris*. Later on in the morning I drove on to the Stockbridge downs but the weather had become unsettled. *Lysandra coridon* Poda of both sexes were already out however, and a few second brood *C. minimus*. *Thymelicus sylvestris* L. was particularly common. In the afternoon I took my eldest son

* 52 Thorold Road, Bitterne Park, Southampton, SO2 4JG.

to Lepe beach but we were soon driven off by lashing showers and we started to make our way home. A quick inspection of a strong New Forest colony of *P. argus* produced a mint female ab. *postradiata* B. & L. literally within seconds of our arrival. We then examined scores more, my son Kenneth doing most of the running, but no more aberrations were forthcoming.

The *coridon* on Stockbridge Down gave me some warning of the early hatch of this species and I turned my attention to the Winchester Downs most evenings. These blues were already out in great strength but variation in this locality was, as usual, absent or of a minor degree.

It was a great experience, when I arrived at Portland on July 17th at around 8.15 a.m., to see hundreds of *coridon* males sitting on the turf, their gleaming, silver-blue wings outspread to catch the early sun. Later on these males dispersed in search of mates. The easiest way to detect freshly emerged females in fact, was to look for a pile of struggling males, a loose scrum of a dozen or more, where underneath would be the female, usually already *in cop*. I met a number of entomologists at Portland. Mr. Donald Russwurm showed me a superb *ultrafowleri* which his co-collector, Mr. Mark Middleton, had boxed that morning; and Messrs. Revels and Tyler who had been there for two or three days had also done well with this beautiful var. Many of the *coridon* males were already starting to look the worse for wear though, and the following week when I returned I had the slightly frustrating experience of finding almost immediately two *ultrafowleri* both of which were in a fringeless condition and unsuitable as specimens. There were also some good *caeca* and *obsoleta* forms but I did not encounter any of the striated forewing vars. that others found there this year. I was pleased with a fair *E. semele* ab. *monocillata* Lempke.

On the way home from the first visit, a small detour took me past a clump of wych elms beside the road. Drab and ragged little butterflies imbibing from bramble blossom beneath the trees were *S. w-album*. A female that I netted looked very weary indeed but lived another eight days and obliged with about 25 ova.

We started off for Worth Maltravers on July 24th where we were to stay for the next week. We rented a cottage and in the garden was a magnificent buddleia and several luxuriant pink valerians. It was a real luxury to watch a feasting throng of butterflies, mostly *urticae*, *io* and *Vanessa atalanta* L. while eating our own breakfast outdoors. Occasionally *Vanessa cardui* L. and once or twice a surprise *paphia* visited the mauve flowers and there were usually one or two *semele* flitting from buddleia to white-washed wall and back again. The children were particularly fascinated by the *Macroglossum stellatarum* L. which were attracted by the valerian. Later on I found a full-grown larva of this little hawkmoth which was feeding on bedstraw.

Strangely enough *E. semele* seemed more frequent in the garden than on the neighbouring coastal downland where I explored most days. Here *M. galathea*, *M. jurtina* and *P. icarus* were fairly common and *Thymelicus actaeon* L. locally abundant in the cliff edge areas. *L. coridon*, however, was rather sparse and extraordinarily wild at all times of the day. My route to and from the main *coridon* ground took me along a narrow path where ivy hung from the grey stone walls and invariably two or three *C. argiolus* would flutter out as I passed by.

On July 26th I walked as far as the cliffs above Dancing Ledge and in a smallcombe set back a little from the sea I was pleasantly surprised to see two worn female *P. argus*, a butterfly I thought had disappeared from this part of the coast.

The first few days of August were spent in Sussex and on the 3rd an early male *L. bellargus* was flying on a steep downland slope near Lewes.

After our return to Southampton I went, on August 5th, to a secluded down not far from Winchester to which Mr. Robert Craske had directed me. *Hesperia comma* L. was whirring over the short turf in plenty, in numbers comparable to the strong colony near Stockbridge. Other species accompanied the skipper, including a few *coridon* and many *icarus* and *Lycaena phlaeas* L.

On August 6th *L. coridon* was still around in strength on the chalk near Alton Barnes—a locality famed in bygone days for the female *syngrapha* forms. These superb downs have an unmistakably different atmosphere from the southern chalk and perhaps the stark imprints of prehistoric man which are much a feature of this area have a lot to do with it.

L. coridon was still flying in numbers on the Winchester downs and by the second week in August was joined by a very welcome sprinkling of *L. bellargus*. Two or three second brood *E. tages* were in evidence on August 10th.

The Adonis Blue was quite plentiful on a down on the Wilts./Hants. border when I went there with Dr. Tom Tolman on August 21st. The brilliant *bellargus* males were fresh for the most part and females just coming out. A few worn *semele* of a large form flitted over the thinly turfed chalk. *L. bellargus* is a favourite with my wife, but on August 28th when I took her to see this interesting stretch of downland it actually rained—the first time in this area for about six weeks! We did see a few *bellargus* in a brief period of bleary sunshine and one of them was sitting on a spray of heather which must be an unusual feeding plant for this butterfly.

The late summer butterflies must have had some difficulty in finding nectar as the torrid weather of July and August had produced desert-like conditions in some areas. Even by late July the coastal slopes in Dorset were a unicolorous raw sienna. Consequently, the season tailed off rapidly towards the end; even so 1976 must surely go down in entomological history as a remarkable butterfly year.